



# CULTURE CROSSING

A community built guide to cross-cultural etiquette & understanding


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## EXPLORE YOUR CULTURAL BAGGAGE

The one thing we all do when heading out on an international trip is pack a bag. We may pack different things depending on the climate, availability of products, and other personal needs. But a suitcase full of socks and toothpaste isn't the only bag we lug around with us. Whether or not we know it, most of us also tote around at least a few pieces of cultural baggage. Like any good suitcase, our cultural baggage contains loads of compartments and hidden pockets—but they are stuffed with things that are less tangible and more likely to get you into trouble when crossing borders.

### What is Culture?

Before you start sorting through your cultural baggage, it's helpful to understand what we mean by "culture". Culture can mean many things—it's a vast concept that can be defined in a wide variety of ways. One of the simplest and most comprehensive ways to think about culture is as the complete way of life of a group of people. For the purposes of the Culture Crossing guide, we focus on aspects of culture that relate to etiquette, communication, social and business interactions, and other elements critical to fostering sensitivity, awareness and understanding in our ever-expanding global community. To read more about the kind of cultural information featured in the Culture Crossing guides, click [here](#).

### What's In Your Cultural Baggage?

Our values, assumptions, biases, and communication styles are some of the things that turn up in our cultural baggage. Neatly folded into one corner of the bag might be your views of time. In the other corner, your expectations about gender roles. Check that zippered side pouch and you may find your sense of personal space and comfort level with confrontation. And then there are the countless gestures and mannerisms that inevitably tumble out of your overstuffed bag when you least expect it.

### Are You Culturally Aware of Yourself?

When you are immersed in a foreign culture, lack of awareness of your own cultural traits can make you feel vulnerable, frustrated and fearful. Interactions with people from other cultures might leave you thinking; "That's so backward", "They're so lazy! How uptight!" Although some of these reactions—or judgments—are based on individual personality, many of them are based on a set of expectations and perceptions instilled in us by our respective cultures. Becoming aware of the nuances that comprise our own cultures can result in some serious self-discovery. Here are a few things to chew on as you begin to take stock of your own culture:

- **How close do you usually stand from a friend while talking? How about a business colleague? A stranger? How close is too close?**
- **How much eye contact is too much? Too little? Why?**
- **How comfortable are you when a friend touches your shoulder or pats your arm while talking with you? A colleague? An acquaintance? When does it become too much?**
- **When do you show up for a party: on time? 10 minute late? 2 hours late? 5 minutes early? How about a business meeting?**
- **Do you usually get directly to the point? Beat around the bush? Somewhere in between? Why?**
- **What's more important, the group or the individual? Are you more concerned with maintaining harmony with those around you or achieving the best results for yourself?**
- **When showing someone where something is, do you point? Gesture with one finger? The whole hand? How do you beckon someone? Fingers inward? Outward? What's the sign for money? What gestures are taboo?**

The way you answer these questions may be based on culture as much as (or more than) individual personality. Culture influences our behavior in countless ways—subconsciously guiding our actions, reactions and interactions. One way of becoming more self aware and discovering some of the origins of your behavior is by examining some of the key aspects of culture including: views of self, perceptions of time, and verbal and non-verbal communication styles. Note: not all individuals from a given culture will fit neatly into these groupings and definitions, but there is

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usually some truth in these generalizations.

### **ME or WE: How Do You See Yourself?**

Around the world, people have differing views when it comes to personal identity. Some see themselves as individualists while others are more collectivist. While most cultures/countries lean toward one of these extremes, you would be hard pressed to find cultures in which people are exclusively one way or the other.

#### **Individualist (Me) Traits:**

- Personal well being is more important than the group's well being
- Individual achievement is valued over group accomplishments.
- Standing out from the group and being acknowledged is encouraged.
- Personal freedom and individual rights are paramount.
- Being a member of a group does not define who you are.

#### **Collectivist (We) Traits:**

- The well being of the group (company, family, country, etc.) is more important than personal well being.
- The success of the group takes precedence over the individual.
- Standing out from the group is looked down upon and discouraged.
- Group harmony, interdependence, and saving face is paramount.
- Being a member of a group is essential to one's identity, success, and/or survival.

### **ON THE CLOCK: Views Of Time**

You probably never thought of time as something that can be viewed in more than one way. It turns out that some cultures view time as linear and others view time as cyclical.

#### **Living by a linear clock means:**

- Time is limited and must be used carefully and efficiently.
- Sticking to schedules, plans and meeting deadlines are highly valued.
- Punctuality takes precedence over personal needs.

#### **For those who live by a cyclical clock:**

- Time is unlimited; there is always more of it, there's always tomorrow.
- Deadlines, plans, and schedules are considered flexible.
- Personal needs and relationships tend to take precedence over punctuality.

### **SAY WHAT? Verbal Communications**

Some cultures communicate directly, that is, they say exactly what they mean (no beating around the bush). Other cultures take a more indirect path when communicating, requiring creative speaking and listening techniques.

#### **Direct Communication**

- Say what you mean—very little need for reading into things.
- The idea of saving face is not of major consequence in most situations.
- Silence in conversations is viewed as uncomfortable. Interruptions are common.

#### **Indirect Communication**

- Imply what you mean. Reading into things is the definitive way of communicating.
- Saving face and maintaining harmony is paramount.
- Silence in conversations is expected and appreciated. It is usually associated in a positive sense. Interruptions are to be avoided.

### **WHAT'S NOT BEING SAID: Non-verbal Communication**

Non-verbal communication encompasses a wide variety of things. For the purpose of this website we have chosen to focus on a few factors that tend to have the greatest impact on interactions when crossing cultures.

#### **Spatial Relations**

How far or close you stand, sit, or walk with another person varies widely



throughout cultures. Personal space requirements can also vary within a single culture, depending on if you are interacting with family, members of the opposite sex, or business colleagues. Generally speaking, there are some cultures in which people are comfortable at less than an arm's length away from one another and will try to close the gap if the other person feels to far away. In other cultures, people may keep a buffer zone of three to four feet between one another and might try to widen the gap if the other person is too close.

### **Tactile Communication**

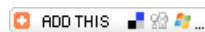
How much touching goes on during conversation is often a cultural trait. People from a "touchy" culture tend to be comfortable with hugs and kisses on the cheek when greeting and departing. During conversations touching on the arm, shoulders, hands, elbows, leg, etc. is very common. People from a "keep your hands to yourself" culture are comfortable with little or no touching when greeting and departing. During conversations touching is virtually non-existent and if it does occur, it can be a major faux pas.

### **Eye Contact**

To look or to look away, that is the question. In some cultures, direct eye contact is the way to go—it suggests confidence, respect, and interest in what the other person is saying. To look away may suggest being suspicious, shifty, and untrustworthy in most situations. In other cultures, people expect and appreciate indirect eye contact when interacting. For them indirect eye contact is often viewed as a show of respect, politeness, and reverence, while direct eye contact may suggest that a person is untrustworthy or aggressive.

### **Gestures**

Each culture has its own set of gestures including hand movements, head nods/shakes, facial expressions, etc. Some cultures have gestures that look similar but mean VERY different things. For example, the popular "O.K." hand signal used by many Americans usually means "go screw yourself" in [Brazil](#). The thumbs up signal means "good job" or "yes/O.K." in most countries, but in [Iran](#) it can mean "up yours".



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